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Testimony of Eric Hammerling, Executive Director, Connecticut Forest & Park Association

Public Hearing Subject Matter	Position
H.B. 7027: AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNium ENDING JUNE 30TH 2019, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR.	Concerned about Cuts to DEEP/Parks and Elimination of CEQ

The Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA) is the first conservation organization established in Connecticut in 1895. For over 120 years, CFPA has offered testimony before the General Assembly on various sustainable forestry, State Park and Forest, trail recreation, and land conservation issues.

I am testifying today to express CFPA's concerns about HB 7027, "An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30th 2019, and Making Appropriations Therefor," and I will also reference Governor's Bill 7051, "An Act Implementing the Governor's Budget Recommendations for General Government."

Our concerns can probably best be summarized by the expression **"pennywise and pound foolish."**

The FY 2018-19 Governor's Budget proposal would cut the Department of Energy & Environmental Protection (DEEP) budget by approximately \$4 million. Part of this cut would continue the FY 2017 cuts which resulted in a 45% cut in seasonal workers, closure of 3 campgrounds, loss of over 30 positions, and reduced services for the public at most museums, gift shops, and other park facilities. Under the proposal, DEEP would lose another 24 positions on top of the 30⁺ positions lost this year, which further compounds the impact of losing over 200 staff positions over the past decade. With these losses, it seems inevitable that more campgrounds and parks will have to either close or be inadequately maintained in FY 2018 and 2019, and overall, the effectiveness of DEEP as protector of Connecticut's land, air, water, and wildlife will decline.

State Parks host 8-9 million visitors, generate over \$1 billion in revenues, and support over 9,000 jobs in the private sector every year. For every \$1 spent on the Parks, \$38 are returned to State coffers. Despite the amazing value State Parks provide to Connecticut, the state is not investing in these precious assets. Only 70 field staff remain to care for 109 State Parks and more than 1/3 of these staff either are or will be eligible to retire in the next few years. Our state's assets can become liabilities if we continue to neglect them.

When cuts in the General Fund are made across state government, the first cuts at DEEP often come at the expense of seasonal workers who represent ~85% of the Department's workforce between the Spring and Fall. Seasonals perform many critical functions such as being lifeguards, conducting water quality and habitat monitoring, leading patrols for public safety, fish stocking and hatchery operations, as well as maintaining facilities for the public. Without seasonals, all campgrounds would close, most parks would be unstaffed, and the \$6 million/year

typically collected at entry gates and campgrounds would be lost to the General Fund. Ironically, seasonal workers are the least expensive workers at DEEP because they receive few employment benefits.

Does it make sense to cut the least expensive workers at DEEP who collect the bulk of fees generated by the State Parks, an amount which every year significantly exceeds the cost of their labor? Of course not, but seasonal workers are cut because they and the State Parks depend 100% on the General Fund, and Connecticut is one of only 2 states in the nation that depends so lopsidedly upon the General Fund. We can't keep cutting the Parks and seasonals and expect that it isn't going to impact the value of our state's treasures as well as negatively affect many other public health, recreational, ecosystem, and other benefits they provide.

Connecticut needs to get serious and start generating revenues for the State Parks, or at least put to work the revenues that are being generating by State Parks right now. We need a dedicated, non-lapsing account for Parks, and we need to implement creative ideas for generating revenues such as the Passport to the Parks which would generate \$14 million through a \$5/year DMV charge, and in return would provide free Park admission to every vehicle with a Connecticut license plate.

The same principle of "pennywise and pound foolish" can be extended to the proposed elimination of the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ). CEQ does five things that are critical to be done by an independent agency:

1. Assess the condition of Connecticut's environment and provide an annual report to the Governor with recommendations on ways to improve;
2. Advise other state agencies to minimize the environmental impacts of proposed construction projects;
3. Hear and investigate citizens' complaints and allegations of violations of environmental laws;
4. Publish the Environmental Monitor online with information on State agency projects and proposed sales or transfers of state-owned lands; and
5. Publish special reports on key topics such as the report recently published on the issue of energy sprawl.

CEQ performs all of these critical functions well, and does so with a lean budget of \$174,000 and two staff.

The Governor's Budget Implementer Bill, HB 7051, proposes eliminating CEQ from the statutes and shifting each of CEQ's responsibilities to DEEP. We have great faith in DEEP; however, you have heard a lot of testimony about the current shortfalls in DEEP's budget, and DEEP's hesitancy to accept new, additional responsibilities. Not only would it be difficult to continue CEQ's responsibilities within DEEP, but DEEP would be placed in the position of having several potential conflicts of interest: reporting on its own construction projects, giving an unbiased annual report on how its programs are doing to protect the environment, investigating complaints that DEEP may have not done things properly, publishing information on state land transfers where DEEP may be either a donating or receiving party, etc. Continuing CEQ as an independent agency would avoid these conflicts.

If a new agency were proposed to perform the functions of CEQ, it could easily justify a larger budget and additional staff. We certainly agree with the assertion of Rivers Alliance of CT that "We estimate that CEQ saves the state many times more that amount in staff time, legislators' time, consultants' fees, and litigation. The elimination of CEQ does not make financial sense." Please don't let CEQ be eliminated.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and thank you for the important work you do.